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Claims of being undemocratic not true

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he is sad that the Government is accused of being undemocratic and that it has the courts under its control.

The Prime Minister and Umno president said he was also unhappy with what appeared to be double standards in the perception of some quarters, of court decisions involving Government parties and the Opposition.

Speaking at a Press conference after chairing a three-and-a-half-hour meeting of the Umno supreme council at the party's headquarters here, Dr Mahathir argued:

"If, indeed, the Government was undemocratic and that it controlled the courts, Umno would not have been declared unlawful in 1988."

Citing the Press coverage on Kota Melaka MP Lim Guan Eng's case as an example, Dr Mahathir said:

"Statements by Lim Kit Siang (Opposition leader and Guan Eng's father) that there is injustice in court decisions are given prominence, but the misfortune that befalls the party and Government following other court decisions, were not highlighted by comparison.

(Guan Eng was found guilty and fined RM15,000 by the Malacca High Court on April 28 on the charge of sedition and for maliciously making a false publication.)

"The foreign Press is expected to criticise the court's decision to fine Guan Eng ... but it seems the local Press has adopted a similar stance.

"We are perplexed as to why such an opinion could be formed when the action taken is based on the law," he said.

(The Attorney-General has filed an appeal against the inadequacy of the fines.)

Dr Mahathir said when Umno was declared unlawful or when the court decided in favour of the Opposition as seen in several cases related to the general election, the decisions were easily accepted.

"If these decisions had involved the DAP, the Press would have exploded.

"But when it happened to Umno, there is nothing ... as if the Opposition is privileged, can do anything they like and no action can be taken against them even if these are within the law."

"I want to know whether members of the Opposition are exempted or are immune from the law.

"Even the Sultans are no longer immune ... but the Opposition expects that anything they do, the court and the law cannot touch them," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the courts had also decided against Government parties in election matters even though the people had made their choice of candidate but that the Government did not protest.

"In Guan Eng's case, it was made to look as if the Government was undemocratic and controls the courts.

"If this is true, then why was Kit Siang fined only RM2,000, which allows him to continue as an MP. Doesn't that show that the court was siding with the opposition?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir continued:

"When the court presses on the Government, we didn't protest and the Press considers this to be normal."

Dr Mahathir had earlier stunned members of the Press when he "announced" that the Government had decided to ban the DAP.

Asked to clarify this, he said the DAP was not banned but that he only

made the announcement to drive home his point that in issues involving the Opposition, everyone would take notice and give the matter serious attention.

He said contrary to popular belief, the local Press was "far from supportive of the Government".

He said: "The reporting that I see on Guan Eng, the publicity given to him ... appears to be that this is an unfair action taken against him.

"For example, our candidate has won (in Begunan, Sarawak) but is not recognised by the court because someone is said to have given money to someone else.

"It is not him or his agents who gave the money, but he has to pay the price (as his victory was declared null and void).

"But in Guan Eng's case, it is clear he has committed an offence under the law. But why the difference in perception?"

Asked whether he was using the Press coverage on the sedition case to show that the local Press was not supportive of the Government, the Prime Minister said it looked like it.

"Yes. The local Press as well as the foreign Press," he said, citing the attention given to speeches by Kit Siang.

When pointed out that this was the first time he or any Government leader had spoken strongly on the sedition case, he said reporters had never asked him to comment on it before.

"Today I take the opportunity (to raise the matter) as it was discussed by the supreme council. I meet the Press often but no one has asked me. In fact, I spend most of my time being followed by the Press."

Dr Mahathir said he was sure in some countries, stern action would be taken against him (Guan Eng) for making various accusations against the Government.

"Probably, he will be brought to court for some reason or other and heavily fined and will never be an MP again.

"But in Malaysia, he is free to say nasty things, but because he was seditious, action was taken by the court but not me."

Asked whether he felt Guan Eng deserved the penalties, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't care whether he deserved it or not, but it is within the law.

"He did something wrong and was not even fined the maximum or sent to jail. But there are quarters already saying that the Government is undemocratic."

Dr Mahathir said that Guan Eng speaks in Parliament, he spits all his accusations against the Government "and we put up with him."

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